

Sink or Swim
Matthew 14:22-33
August 21, 2008
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So, have you heard of this guy Michael Phelps? Word is he's pretty good. In fact, at my high school reunion last Saturday, about 15 of us snuck out of the reunion and into the hotel jazz bar to watch his final race. I'm not sure the musicians appreciated the chants of "USA!" but it didn't matter. One of my classmates said Phelps broke so many records he wondered if the pool water had steroids in it. That race was a history-making moment.

But it almost didn't happen, because Michael Phelps almost never got in the pool. I read in his biography that he was often teased because of his big ears, had to deal with his parents' broken marriage, and was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Not everyone who faces those kinds of challenges is able to move past them and succeed. Every human story is the struggle between faith and fear.

We continue our Olympic theme that was started a couple weeks ago when I preached about running and continue last week when Michael (Swartzentruber, not Phelps) talked about being spiritual weightlifters. Today, we're going to look at how we can become spiritual Olympians as swimmers, so put on your goggles and your Speedos and let's get in the pool. OK, maybe just your goggles.

Like Michael Phelps, Peter knows a bit about challenges. As one of Jesus' disciples, he was often the spokesperson for Jesus' followers, taking the lead on proclaiming Christ as the messiah. But for every one of his swan dives there was a belly flop, like when he tried to set Jesus' agenda for him or when he pledged his allegiance to Jesus then denied knowing three times.

Our story today captures an image of the best and worst of Peter. After feeding the 5,000, Jesus sends the disciples away in a boat, hoping to get a little alone time with God. Matthew tells us the disciples are stuck out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee during the fourth watch of the night, which would have been between 3 and 6 a.m. That means the disciples had been rowing and bailing for up to nine hours, and had yet to make it across the sea. Why? Because the wind was against them. As Chicago residents, we know what that means, don't we? Anyone who's ever thrown up a shovelful of snow only to have it blown back in their faces knows what it's like to have the wind against them. You ever had that feeling, like the wind was against you? You work and work and work and get nowhere, you take one step forward and are blown two steps back.

So the disciples are battling the wind and the storm and the sea. There's biblical significance in this battle. In the Bible, water is the dwelling place of all the evil forces against us, and it is water that God repeatedly conquers. In the beginning of Genesis, God's Spirit hovered over the waters and brought order out of the chaos. When Moses and the Israelites are making their escape, God parts the waters of the Red Sea. And in our story, as the disciples battle the raging storm, Jesus comes to them, walking on the water, stepping on the evil, saying to them, "Take heart, it is I, don't be afraid."

Did you notice that in Matthew's version of the story, Jesus doesn't immediately calm the storm? First, while the wind is howling and the waves are crashing, he says, "Don't be afraid." In the midst of stormy circumstances, he asks for trust. Wouldn't it

have been easier just to make everything OK? Maybe, but he knew this would not be the last storm the disciples faced. After he was gone, as they resumed their profession as fishermen, there would be more storms. Sometimes Jesus calms the storms, but sometimes Jesus calms us in the midst of the storms. I would rather learn from Jesus how to make it through the storms than for him to condition me to expect calm waters all the time, because there will always be storms in our lives, won't there?

Peter, always the most impulsive of the disciples, immediately asks to come to Jesus on the water. You may see this as either incredibly bold or incredibly stupid. It's certainly not very practical. Besides Jesus, I've only known one other person who could walk on water, and that was my father when he saw a snake in his canoe. Dad wasn't concerned about the practicality of jumping out of the canoe, but I can guarantee his ankles didn't even get wet before he hit the shore. Peter wasn't concerned about practicalities, either. My dad wanted to be where the snake *wasn't*; Peter simply wanted to be where Jesus *was*. He wanted to be with his Savior. The water is where Jesus was, not in the boat. So Peter steps out onto the water and begins to walk toward Jesus.

Now, there are two kinds of people in this world: sinkers and floaters. My Uncle Pete was a floater. He could lie on his back all day in his swimming pool, arms outstretched, floating on the top of the water. I tried to do that, but I'm a sinker. I learned to swim by flailing my arms and legs until I either made it to the other side of the pool or splashed all the water out of it. But I never could float like Uncle Pete. When I tried, I always ended up at the bottom of the pool, which I found out wasn't nearly as comfortable as the top.

Peter, as we learn in this story, is also a sinker. You know he floated for a second, right on top of the water. For a moment he was able to block out the howling winds around him and focus on Jesus and his presence. But just as quickly, he remembered the storm, he remembered the wind, he remembered that he was only human and couldn't actually walk on water, and he began to sink.

Now, some may look at this story and say that Peter failed, that his faith wasn't strong enough. "You know, if he had just kept his eye on Jesus, if he had just had more faith, he would have succeeded." It's that fear of failure that can keep us from taking steps to grow our own faith, and fear is a strong motivating factor in our lives. Fred Craddock points out that so much of the things we think and do are motivated by fear. Jealousy is the fear of the loss of love. Greed is the fear of insecurity. Cheating is a fear of failure. Lying is a fear of punishment. Fear, fear, fear.

And that's true in our spiritual lives, as well. What if I start reading the Bible but don't understand it? What if I try to pray every day but forget every once in awhile? What if I serve at church but don't do well? What if I join the choir but miss a few notes? Fear, fear, fear. Sometimes it's easier just to stay in the boat, isn't it?

Fear of failure is a strong deterrent, isn't it? It puts a tight grip on us, controls us, keeps us from stepping out. No one likes to be a failure. But failure is not an event; it's a judgment about an event. And we control that judgment. John Ortberg tells the story that before Jonas Salk developed a vaccine for polio that finally worked, he tried two hundred unsuccessful ones. Somebody asked him, "How did it feel to fail 200 times?" Salk said, "I didn't fail 200 times. I just discovered 200 ways not to vaccinate for polio." Failure is how to choose to see something.

Some people would rather stay in the boat than meet Jesus out on the water. Ortberg calls those kinds of people Boat Potatoes. What if Big Ears Phelps had been a Boat Potato? What if he had listened to those kids who teased him? Sure, it's risky out there on the water, but it's just as risky to stay in the boat, because a gift that is not being used will soon atrophy and lose all its strength. If you never take the risk to leave the boat, you'll never experience the glorious joy of walking on water. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage assumes fear but acts anyway.

When we contemplate taking the risk to grow and strengthen our faith, the worst failure is not to sink in the waves. The worst failure is never getting out of the boat. Jesus is not in the boat. Jesus is out on the water. To try and succeed, that is glorious. To try and not succeed, that is painful. But it is not failure. Failure is not trying at all.

And if we do try and not succeed, then by the grace of God we're given a second opportunity. What happened to Peter when he started to sink? Did he go under a few times? Did he become shark food? No. He cried out, "Lord, save me!" And Christ reached out his hand and pulled Peter up to safety.

Peter knew he couldn't walk on water. Peter knew he would sink as soon as he left the safety of the boat. So why step out? Why take the risk? First of all, because all of life is a risk, isn't it? If we're going to live the life God calls us to live, we are going to have to take risks. Getting up in the morning is a risk. Driving a car is a risk. Eating at a restaurant is a risk. Life is a risk. The question is: do we face those risks with fear or with trust? I believe Peter chose trust he knew that with Christ's help, he could do the impossible, he could walk on water and he trusted that if he began to sink, Christ would be there.

Practicing our faith doesn't mean we'll win eight gold medals but it does mean that we choose to believe that God is with us during the storms, and that we choose to live our lives free from fear. Yes, we will doubt. Yes, we may sink at times. But by choosing faith over fear, we are daring to put our trust in the God who stills all storms, the God who calls us out of the boat and into the risky life of faith put into action each and every day. It is our choice to dare to walk on water, or to just stay in the boat?